

415 THE BALLAD OF READING GAOL

But there is no sleep when men
must weep

Who never yet have wept:
So we—the fool, the fraud, the
knave—

That endless vigil kept,
And through each brain on hands of
pain

Another's terror crept.

Alas! it is a fearful thing

To feel another's guilt!

For, right within, the sword of Sin

Pierced to its poisoned hilt,

And as molten lead were the tears
we shed

For the blood we had not spilt,

The Warders with their shoes of felt

Crept by each padlocked door,

And peeped and saw, with eyes of
awe,

Grey figures on the floor,

And wondered why men knelt to

pray

Who never prayed before.

All through the night we knelt and
prayed,

Mad mourners of a corse!

The troubled plumes of midnight
were

The plumes upon a hearse:

And bitter wine upon a sponge

Was the savour of Remorse.

The grey cock crew, the red cock
crew,

But never came the day:

And crooked shapes of Terror
crouched,

In the corners where we lay:

And each evil sprite that walks by
night

Before us seemed to play.

They glided past, they glided fast,

Like travellers through a mist:

They mocked the moon in a rigadon

Of delicate turn and twist,

And with formal pace and loathsome
grace

The phantoms kept their tryst.

With mop and mow, we saw them go,

Slim shadows hand in hand: